State History Is Squeezed Into 11 Lines

HARRISBURG (AP) — Five or six times a year, George Beyer squeezes hundreds of years of history into about 50 words.

Beyer, a slender, bearded man, is the person in charge of all those blue and gold historical markers that dot Pennsylvania's highways and city streets.

More than 1,400 are in place, although their production had dropped over the years until now. To celebrate Pennsylvania's 300th birthday, each of the 67 counties is getting a historical marker that details its uniqueness in the state.

"The markers were put up at a terrific pace when they were started in 1945," said Beyer, a historian with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

"But we've dropped to five or six a year," he said. "Basically it's the money. A sign that cost $98 when we started now can cost $1,000."

There are the expected signs marking wars and their heroes — Gettysburg's Civil War campaign is remembered by 30 markers, more than any other place, event or person. But there is a wide and amusing variety of signs.

The town of Pigeon, for example, has one. Vast flights of now-extinct carrier pigeons used to nest in trees in that area of Forest County.

Mixed in with the usual array of historical and political figures is none other than cowboy actor Tom Mix. His marker explains that the silent film star was born near Driftwood in Cameron County in 1880.

Capt. C.V. Gridley, best known for his place in Admiral George Dewey's command during the Spanish-American War, "You may fire when ready, Gridley," is recalled by a sign in Erie.

Part of Beyer's job is to glean through the 25 or so suggestions for markers mailed in each year, finding the ones with statewide interest and then boiling them down to 11 lines on a cast-aluminum sign.

"Some people want their family remembered, or the burial spot of some obscure ancestor — they're the ones most sure of not being used," he said.

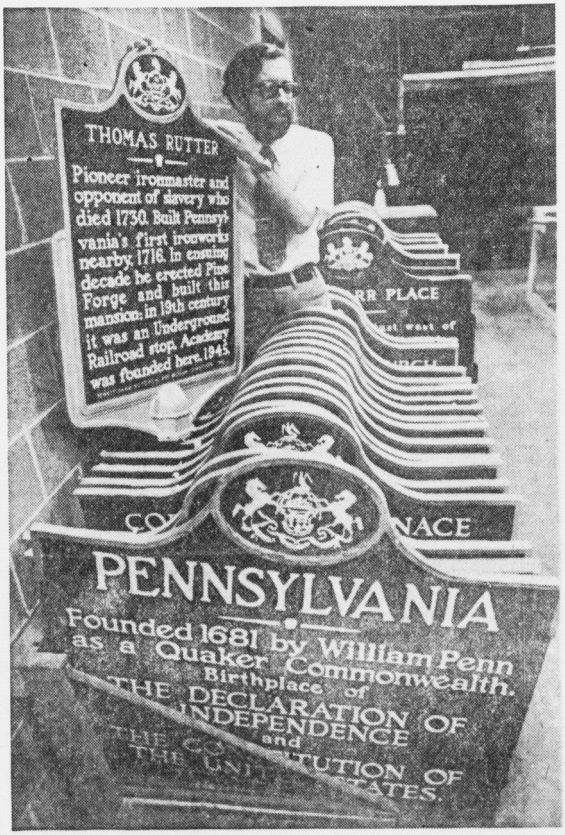
Surprisingly, history-laden Philadelphia is among the counties with the fewest historical markers from the commission, with 15 signs.

By comparison, Dauphin County, home of the state Capital, has 53, second only to Lancaster's 59. Clarion, Jefferson and Sullivan have the least — four each.

"We realize there is a certain imbalance geographically," Beyer said, "and we're trying now to right that.

"We focusing more on black history. Until a few years ago, almost none of the markers bore in any way on black history," he said. Markers are prepared for Horace Pippman, a black artist in West Chester, and Thomas Rutter, an 18th century ironmaster who opposed slavery and whose Berks County mansion was used as an Underground Railroad stop in the 1800's.

"In some cases, our markers become status symbols, but that should be played down," said Beyers. "The basic reason for putting up the signs is to make people, who otherwise wouldn't be, aware of an aspect of state history."


THOMAS RUTTER
Pioneer ironmaster and opponent of slavery who died 1730. Built Pennsylvania's first ironworks nearby 1716. In ensuing decade he erected Pine Forge and built this mansion. In 19th century it was an Underground Railroad stop. Academy was founded here 1945.
PENNSYLVANIA
Founded 1681 by William Penn as a Quaker Commonwealth.
Birthplace of
THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE
and

George Beyer, a historian with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, is shown with historical markers at the William Penn Museum in Harrisburg. Beyer is in charge of selecting subjects featured on the markers and for writing the text for them. There are 1,400 such plaques throughout the state. (AP Laserphoto)